

Emerson Sawmill
(Warrensburg Mills)
Warrensburg
Warren County
New York

HAER No. NY-146

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Emerson Sawmill
(Warrensburg Mills)

NY-146

Location: On the Scroon River, River Street, in Warrensburg, Warren County, New York

Date of Erection: Used as sawmill site ca. 1820
This structure ca. 1900

Owner: New York State Office of Parks & Recreation
Warrensburg Historical Society

Use: Demolished 1980
(used as sawmill until 1968)

Significance: The Emerson Sawmill was an integral part of the Warrensburg Historic District, an early 19th century industrial community based on the abundance of wood in the Adirondack wilderness. The community at its peak had only one brick structure, everything else was wood frame.

The original mill dam is still intact, formerly straddled by the Emerson Mill. The dam consists of piled boulders with a wood plank shield on the exposed side to prevent dislodging of the boulders by the spillover.

The building was built out over the river on piles, with a broad gable roof with a squat cupola. The wings at the north and south continued the main roof line. The building was sheathed with wood and had diamond shaped openings on the north, overlooking the river. The water powered equipment of the sawmill, in use until 1968, was in place until the demolition of the building in 1980.

The Emerson Sawmill served as a reminder of a vital part of Adirondack history, the lumber industry. As lumber resources were depleted, the strength of the industry diminished, eventually to be replaced in the region by the clothing manufacturing industry. The intimidating physical characteristics of the site were certainly not an attraction for settlement in the early nineteenth century, for the barren and rocky soil allowed only subsistence farming. It was the endless ranks of white pine that brought settlers. Lumbering had started at the fringes of the vast wilderness by the first decade of the 1800s. It had reached the heart of the Adirondacks by the 1850s.

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Early lumbering was made possible by the numerous small and large streams, rivers, and lakes which made up the transportation routes for logs. Log driving eventually became such a nuisance and caused such damage to private property that legislation was required declaring certain rivers "public highways". Hardwoods were initially not logged because they were too heavy and dense to float. The coming of the railroads allowed the forests that were almost stripped of softwoods to be re-harvested for hardwoods. The first rail line was from Plattsburg to Point of Rocks in 1868, this was later extended to Ausable Forks. A line from Saratoga to North Creek was completed in 1871. Additional lines were completed through 1893. The hardwoods were also overharvested, as the softwoods had been. The industry then turned to the logging of pulpwoods, though changes in the types of woods harvested, the dwindling supplies available, and new technology in the lumbering industry eventually made the sawmills obsolete.

H.P. Smith's History of Warren County, published in 1885, describes the community during the logging days:

"During the period between 1810 and 1820 lumbering became quite a prominent industry. The surface of this town not only, but of the whole county, and the counties to the north and west, was covered with forests of splendid pine, the demand for which gave a great impetus to the hitherto unaroused activities of the region. At this time and for years before there were a greater number of saw-mills in town than there are at present, though they were usually old fashioned and small. Every brook large enough to turn a wheel was brought into requisition. Before 1810 Albro Tripp had a mill on a small brook north of the village, Dudley Farlin came soon after the organization of the town and built the mills now operated by Emerson and Co. He continued proprietor there until 1864, when he sold out to Nelson Warren. The logs were brought to his mills from all the surrounding county - large quantities floated, as now, down the Schroon River...The capacity of these extensive saw-mills may be stated at about 3,000,000 feet of lumber annually, in a good run of water. It is a gang mill, containing seventy saws and four gates. A shingle and lath mill is connected with the saw-mill, and in all from twenty to twenty-five men are kept busy. The logs come from a point above Schroon Lake down the river, a distance of about forty miles. About two miles above the mill is a large boom, and near the mill is another, both of which have been in use since the original construction of the mill. The lumber, which is made from, perhaps, 15,000 market logs a year, is shipped almost exclusively by the Adirondack Railroad."

A souvenir edition of the Warrensburg News published in 1898 mentions that a large number of people in the community "find employment in the extensive lumber mills of Emerson & Co.", but the change in focus of the industry is indicated by the following addition, "still others are in the employ of the Schroon River Pulp Company". Yet, as previously noted, the Emerson Sawmill continued to operate until 1968. Although an active campaign was made by the Warrensburg community, and by the State of New York, to save the building, it had become so deteriorated by 1980 that the only viable option left to the owners was demolition.

References: Manley, Doris; National Register Nomination Form, 1975
Smith, H.P.; History of Warren County, (Syracuse, NY: 1885), p. 577

Transmitted by: Kevin Murphy, Historian HAER, July 1984